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Amicus Curious

His avocation is making the calls

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Daniel F. Capron has been booed by roaring crowds, was once asked mockingly whether he was blind, and he didn't even flinch as a full, quart-sized water bottle was hurled straight at him from a stadium of about 60,000 people.

The Chicago lawyer who represents claimants in his workers' compensation practice is in his element as a Big Ten Conference football referee — the pinnacle of his so-called avocation.

For Capron, who has been officiating Big Ten games for about a decade, the most thrilling moment of a football event is 20 minutes before kickoff, when he and the crew he leads enter the field.

"It's a fall afternoon and the stadium is full. That's a lot of people, and they can make an awful lot of noise. Then the home band will come out on the field, and they'll play the fight song, and the place is just electric," Capron said in an interview from his Loop law office of Capron & Averginos P.C. "Everybody's adrenaline is pumping. Everybody thinks they're going to win that day. Everybody's happy, everybody's upbeat. It's Saturday in America — and it's college football."

Once the game starts, however, "it's business; it's work," he said.

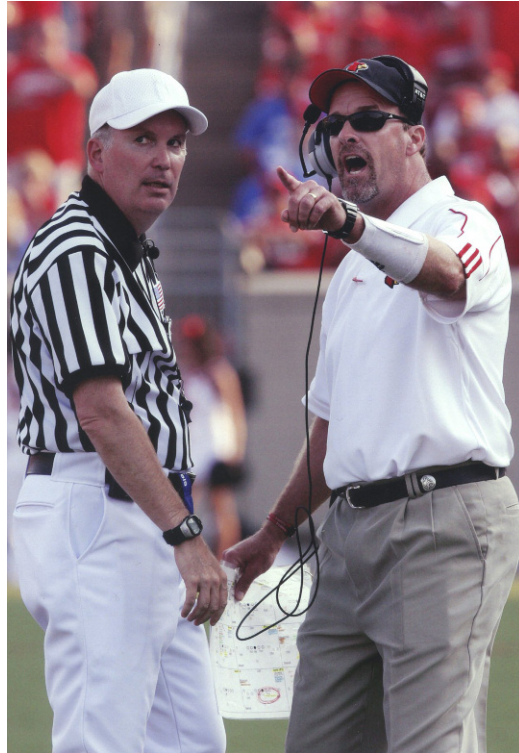
That's when Capron, who serves as crew chief/referee, assumes a role that he says not only takes a keen sense of neutrality and a thick skin, but also athleticism, a sharp mental focus, and an ability to make instantaneous decisions.

"It is obviously physically taxing trying to keep up with these young athletes," said Capron, 52, who added that he jogs three miles each morning to stay fit.

"But the physical effort that is required to officiate a Big Ten football game is nothing compared to the mental exhaustion that you feel at the end of a big football game," he said. "The concentration that's required is so intense that you just get into the locker room and you just almost collapse from mental exhaustion."

Many lawyers can understand what it takes to focus intensely on the legal intricacies of a case, perhaps before a jury of 12 people. Or, in Capron's practice, in arbitration hearings before the Illinois Workers' Compensation Commission.

But what's it like to try to maintain that sort of



Daniel F. Capron, a Big Ten Conference football official, is not persuaded by the argument of Louisville coach Steve Kragthorpe in an appeal of the referee's call for a penalty in a game against Kentucky last year. Capron, of Capron & Averginos P.C., has been a football official for as long as he has been practicing law, working his way to the Big Ten from the grammar school level.

concentration for three hours out on a football field, with about 90,000 people around you watching — and more than that watching on television — while trying to keep up with world-class athletes in a game that has evolved to be more wide open and to move far more quickly than it had in the earlier years of "three yards and a cloud of dust"?

"It's a rush. It's totally intense, and it's the most exciting thing that I do in my life," Capron said.

And while practicing law and officiating Big Ten football both require knowledge of a particular set of rules, Capron pointed out a

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significant difference between the two.

"It's a rare situation in law where the judge won't give you an opportunity, a continuance, to go and brief an issue, or to go look something up," he said. "Whereas, on the football field, you have to know it, you have to know it right now, you have to be right, and you don't have an opportunity to go look something up.

"It's a question of immediacy. And that's why practicing law is easier than officiating football."

Virtually every Friday morning, from Labor Day to Thanksgiving, Capron sets out for the city of the next day's game. Once there, he and his six-man crew typically spend about three hours, he said, reviewing video footage from the previous week's game and critiquing the plays as part of their preparation.

"There's more to it than people realize. The average non-football fan would think, 'Oh, the referees just show up, maybe a half-hour before kickoff, and they probably get a nice parking space right there at the stadium, and they just walk in and work the game,'" Capron said. "That's not even true at the high-school level."

The job does have some perks: the officials each get two free tickets to each game, he said. One of Capron's tickets usually goes to his lawyer wife, Mary Anne, a partner in Hennessy & Roach P.C.

Capron has been officiating football games since he began practicing law in 1981. He started out at the grammar school level, officiating in the Chicago Catholic League at games between schools in the city's Southwest Side.

A product of two Big Ten schools — University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where he received his bachelor's degree in history, and Indiana University School of Law in Bloomington, where he received his J.D. — Capron taught English for a school year at St. Rita High School on the Southwest Side before he took the bar exam. When he became licensed to practice law, he said, he turned to officiating football as a means of maintaining contact with young people — like the students he left for the practice of law.

He joined the Central Officials Association and worked his way through the ranks, with stints at the high school freshman level of the Chicago Catholic

League and the high school varsity level of both the Catholic League and the Chicago Public League, then on to the football games between small colleges, like Wheaton College, North Central College in Naperville, and Lake Forest College.

In 2000, he received the call from the Big Ten, for a spot he said he had applied for but was "convinced it was completely unattainable."

"At any given time, there are approximately 50 officials in the Big Ten Conference. Those officials, however, must be balanced not only racially but geographically. Every year, there would be approximately one to two, maybe three at the most, positions opening up at the Big Ten level. Did they need a guy from Illinois? Did they need a guy who works head linesman, which was my position? The stars really have to align themselves."

That year, he said, they did.

And after about five years of serving as a head linesman, Capron advanced to his current crew chief role.

He has no aspirations of taking his officiating to the National Football League. At this point, he said, "it's not even in the cards because I'm too old." But even if it were, Capron said, pro ball is not the place for him.

"All the things I so much love about our games, they don't have," Capron said. "They don't have the band that comes out and plays their fight song. They don't have a student section. They don't have tailgating going on across from the university library.

"It's the wonderful interplay between academics and athletics that makes Big Ten football so great. And the NFL doesn't have that," Capron said. "That's a business. Those are grown men who are doing it for millions of dollars, and that brings a whole different feel to it."

But at the Big Ten level of play, Capron said, "it is infinitely more intense than the football that I worked in my life that preceded it."

"The coaches of this level are typically paid anywhere from up to \$1 million a year or more," Capron said. "They're extremely well-compensated, and all that is asked of them in return is one thing: Just win."

That is why, he said, "I understand, during the heat of battle, why they get the

way that they get. ... And sometimes, to a greater or lesser degree, they do say things that perhaps, if they had an opportunity to reflect, they would not say."

When tempers flare, and the official becomes the target of shouting, cussing, and harsh criticism, Capron said he aims to "soothe, and never incite."

"We always try to deflect criticism, not take them personally, and always try to kill them with kindness," he said. That, he said, included the time when Penn State head coach Joe Paterno, wearing his signature Coke-bottle glasses, asked Capron whether he was blind when the referee didn't call holding against Michigan during a game in 2002, when both teams were contending for the Big Ten title.

And, just why didn't Capron flinch on the field of Georgia Tech's Bobby Dodd Stadium in 2006, when that heavy, hard plastic water bottle came plunging toward him from the stands as he was announcing a personal foul against the home team late in the game against trailing Notre Dame?

Without that penalty, Capron recalled, it's fourth down for Notre Dame. With the penalty it gives Notre Dame an automatic first down, allowing the team to continue in their drive. Notre Dame went on to score, winning the game.

"The truth of the matter is, because it's a night game and I'm looking into all the lights of the press box, I never saw the water bottle," Capron said. "It hits, probably three feet in front of me, bounces up and it literally clips my hand as it goes by me as I'm announcing this penalty against Georgia Tech.

"I come out of it looking like a total hero to the officiating world and yet, the truth be told, I never saw the doggone thing."

Capron's years of experience as a Big Ten official, he said, have made him a better lawyer.

"You've just been in front of 90,000 people. You've just had Joe Paterno, who's an American icon, screaming at you on national television about some call that maybe you missed or maybe you didn't. And now I'm supposed to go over to the Workers' Compensation Commission on Monday morning and have some lawyer intimidate me on his case? ... Please," Capron said. "You can keep things in perspective a little bit."

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